

# The Silent Dragon

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Summary: Mr. Ping didn't know much about pandas, but he had thought the little cub would have made a sound by now. An AU in which Po is mute. Rated T for safety.

## 1. Chapter 1

Ping wasn't exactly an expert on babies, but he had thought that the cub would at least have cried by now. Plenty of families brought small children to his shop and all of them chattered or cried or laughed at some point. Ping kept an ear out for all the noises in his restaurant, and the sound of children was one of the loudest and most frequent.

But the cub never laughed. He never babbled, or muttered, or cried. Well, to be fair, he did, but silently. When something scared him Ping would find tears on his face, but no cries in his throat. The baby would grin and clap his hands when something amused him, but he didn't make a sound. Once, before Ping knew to baby-proof the kitchen, the young panda had curiously picked up a shiny blade and sliced the pad on his paw, and Ping didn't know about it until he saw the dried blood on the knife; the cub had been completely silent as he cradled his paw against his rounded chest.

Ping had asked one of the village healers to come around and check on the panda, but the cub was healthy, as far as the other goose could tell; to be honest, he hadn't known much about pandas either; they were not exactly common around the Valley of Peace. So Ping was stuck wondering if something had happened to the cub (besides being left in a radish basket in an alley) or if pandas were naturally quiet creatures.

He began to talk to the baby; recipes and cooking tips at first, then whatever came into his mind, until he could keep up a constant stream of chatter. He would talk about the Valley, the villages, and the surrounding farmlands; he described the various trials and tribulations of running a business, and the rewards it could offer;

he talked about his family, his childhood, and the legacy of the Pings' noodle shop. He talked for months, showing the cub how to make the words, trying to encourage him to speak. And around the six-month mark, he did.

Ping was in the middle of a diatribe on the outrageous prices of spices when, for the first time, a small whisper interrupted his speech:

>"Can I call you daddy?"<p>

Ping stopped mid-sentence and turned around, half a bok choy falling from his feathers. Little Po was curled as far as he could beneath the back counter, his radish basket over his head. Ping stepped closer and Po backed up. He looked completely terrified.

Ping slowly dropped to the ground and held out his wings. Something in his throat felt tight and he fought to swallow it down.

"Yes," he whispered hoarsely. "Yes, Po, you can call me daddy."

>The panda peeked out from the edge of the basket to look at the goose, who was steadily losing the battle not to cry. He inched out from under the counter, eyes darting left and right and to both doors, before slowly crawling to Ping and pressing his face against the gander's chest. Ping wrapped his wings around the cub as much as he could and cried into his fur, his sobs nearly drowning out the little echoes of 'daddy, daddy ,daddy'.<p>

By the end of the month, Ping was privately wondering to himself if it might not have been better for the cub to stay mute. Po had become a complete chatterbox after a few false starts, probably to make up for the many months of silence. He initially had had to rest his voice every hour or so, being so unused to using it, but when Po began to seriously speak he spoke, and he spoke, and he spoke. The kitchen was soon filled with descriptions of the panda's latest dream, or daydream, or notes and comments on everything the boy found interesting. When Ping enrolled him in the village school, Po would come home and describe every lesson, every classmate, and every teacher. Ping rather enjoyed the reversal of roles; the world from a toddler's perspective was always exciting and interesting, not to mention totally uncensored; if Po didn't like something he said so very clearly, as completely lacking in tack as all children were. Ping found his vivid descriptions of Mr. Yun's hairy warts and the odd smell that lingered around Mrs. Fa's house hilarious, though he bid the cub to temper his words outside of the kitchen. The panda was at first wary of speaking around other people, but he gradually began to get better at it, and by the time he was five (as far as Ping could guess, at least) he was openly chatting with the customers, mimicking Mr. Ping's customary questions and inquiries about food and drinks, and laughing with the children from his class. Ping had long decided that the sound of the panda's newly discovered laugh was the sweetest sound in the world.

It was a sound that, after one fateful day in the middle of summer, he would not hear again for twenty years.

Po hated nothing more than having to stay still. When his dad was cooking he would have to stay out of his way, but he was free to roam the restaurant and the street in front of it, as long as he didn't leave sight of the kitchen. He spent his time visiting with the

customers â€" his dad called it 'pestering' â€" and he knew lots of the geese, rabbits, and pigs by name, and most of the children who lived in the village. Po, being big and different-looking, wasn't very popular at school but he did make friends easily, so every time a new face came into the shop he made a beeline for them, ready to learn as much as he could. One time he'd met a grown-up who was shorter than him, and had dark eye-patches too, and he lived in the big house on the top of the mountain. Another time he'd met the biggest person he'd ever seen, all grey with dots and a long, long tail that moved. He said that he was a snow leopard, that his fur did get hot in the summer, and he had gotten so big by eating curious children. That was even neater than the pig with one blue eye and one brown eye.

When Po had grown up a little he was allowed to help his dad in the shop. He could sweep and mop and bring customers drinks and sauce to go with their meals, and by the time he was nine (by his dad's estimation, whatever that meant) he was allowed to go to the vegetable and spice stalls by himself and get anything his dad needed, though he sometimes messed up on quantities. He chatted with the people who ran the stalls and traded stories with their children; by then he no longer got weird looks or people asking him strange questions.

One evening, just in time for the dinner rush, his dad ran out of fresh ginger. He gave Po a handful of coins and sent him off to Mrs Chang's across the bridge. Mrs Chang ran a spice stall; she closed just after sunset, so Po would have to be quick. He had crossed the bridge several times before, but never on his own, and he wished that he didn't have to hurry. The setting sun made the small river turn bright orange, and the whole village was dusted with golds and reds. Up on top of the mountains, the big Palace looked like it was on fire.

Po wound through the market stalls, all in various states of closing, and found Mrs Chang packing away her spices for the night. He gave her the coins in exchange for the ginger but didn't linger to talk, having to remind himself that he needed to get back quickly. Po was about to cross the bridge when a loud crash startled him. He turned around, clutching the ginger tight, and something slammed into the ground next to him hard enough to dent the stone. He fell backward and scrambled to the edge of the street, and suddenly everything seemed loud; people were yelling and screaming, stuff was flying everywhere, and a red wave of fire was glowing on the edge of the market. Po felt something cold inside his stomach and he pressed himself between the wall of a house and a large potted plant, shaking so hard that the world looked blurry. The air was hot and dark, full of loud screams and a strange, eerie crackling. People shoved past each other to avoid a large figure that barreled down the street, kicking and punching at everything that was in its way. Po tried to call for his dad but the words wouldn't come out of his throat.

>The huge figure kicked at a half-closed stall, sending it flying down to the bridge. The lanterns on it burst and caught the wreckage on fire, and suddenly Po's vision was filled with flames. He whimpered involuntarily and clapped his paws over his mouth, his terror increased tenfold. He felt like the eyes of the entire world were boring into him. His chest felt tight; something was caught in his throat; <em>something was going to get him.</em>

Po curled into a ball as tight as he could as the fiery figure jumped past him, barely five feet away, throwing people into the air as it ran down the street. He turned his head toward the wall and sat as still and quiet as he could, hearing the panic grow and fade, the heat of the fires searing his back, until he fell into a fearful daze, oblivious to anything but darkness and the smell of smoke.

Ping found his son wedged between a house and a heavy pot, his back covered in streaks of soot and pieces of debris. The destruction Tai Lung had left in his wake was incredible; markets stalls smashed against buildings, the wreckage still flickering with dying flames; people rushing everywhere, strangely quiet, their voices hushed as they searched for family and gathered up the wounded; the still shapes lying beneath crumbled stone or burning wood. Ping felt fear like he had never felt it before, working himself almost into a panic as he searched for his son. Was he one of the bodies being gathered up? Would Ping find him in a still room, laid out next to the other victims? He cast his eyes over every part of the street, searching in the moon - and firelight for a ball of black and white

Ping almost missed him the first sweep around the street, but the strange angle of a plank of wood caught his eye, and he saw underneath it a large, huddled form. Ping rushed over to it and shoved aside the plank; Po twitched at the noise and movement.

"Po, Po, please, turn around and look at me," said Ping, his voice shaking. The panda slowly uncurled. Tears had streaked through the ash and dust on his face, and Ping's own watery eyes made his son look blurry and soft. He gathered the panda in his wings as best he could, clutching him tight as he shook.

"Oh, my son. You're safe, you're safe!"

Po grabbed him and pulled him closer, silently crying into his robe. Around them, people scrambled to and fro, putting out the fires and tending to those who had been injured, but Ping and his son stayed huddled, oblivious to the commotion outside of each other.

Ping's relief did not last long. It was another hour before he tried to get Po to speak, and a week to realize that he never would. His son had fallen silent again, and in the dark of the night Ping wept for the loss of his child's happy laughter.

\* \* \*

><p>AN:I have no idea if anyone's done a mute!Po AU, but I was thinking about it all morning and really, really, really, really, really wanted to do it. I might turn this into a full-out story.

Po is a little bit older when his village is attacked, between two and three or so, just old enough to know that he'll be in trouble if he makes a noise, even if he doesn't understand why or what trouble. So when he speaks, it's not really baby babble. Even if babies and toddlers don't have a fantastic grasp of language just yet they do recognize and understand a decent bit. I imagine that Po's been working on this tiny sentence for weeks, practicing to himself and thinking it over and over. I almost made it 'Can I call oo daddy' but that was more cute than dramatic.

At first I had it that Po reverted back to being mute after encountering the bandit from Hajin Province, but it didn't fit with my plans for the story, so now Tai Lung's rampage was the trigger. I'll post the alternate chapter sometime.

## 2. Chapter 2

When it became evident that Po would not speak, Ping took his mind off of his breaking heart by coming up with ways of communication. Po was going to school to learn his characters, but until he learned them all he and Ping made do with gestures. Writing down everything all the time really wasn't practical, especially when Po was helping with the shop; there just wasn't time. So Ping and his son gradually made up a language of gestures and motions so that Po could convey what he wanted to say without having to write it down or clutch at his head in exasperation.

But even after almost two decades, Ping never forgot the sound of his child's laughter.

\* \* \*

><p>The villagers had become used to their big, silent neighbor in the years he had lived and grown among them. His muteness had been treated with curiosity and pity at first, but by the time Po was thirty Mr. Ping was the only one who really remembered when the panda had ever been an active talker. Po still helped his father with his shop, and the customers were used to seeing him clap his paws to gain Ping's attention, then wave his arms and fingers around in strange motions. The children of the village always asked him about it, and after a while Po made up several dozen little cards, each with a word or phrase on them. Whenever a child asked Po why he waved his paws around instead of speaking he simply pulled out a battered card that read <em>I am mute, so I talk by using hand gestures.<em> More than once a kid had said 'Like this?' and furtively demonstrated an offensive sign. Po had acquired quite a collection.

The cards he kept in numerous small pockets he sewed into his breeches, a pocket for each category. The ones he used most - mainly in the topics of buying something, explaining himself, apologizing, and typical restaurant questions - were kept along his right leg, where he could reach them easily. Cards he didn't use much, as well as a few blanks and a pencil, he had in pockets on his left leg.

Ping had offered to let him stay in the kitchen, and let the goose deal with the customers instead, but Po was a naturally gregarious person, and wasn't willing to let communication difficulties stop him from being so. It didn't mean that things were easy; customers could be really difficult people. Sometimes they wouldn't understand why Po spoke with cards; sometimes they refused to order from him, somehow finding his mere presence an insult; sometimes they just plain couldn't read; lots of times they lost patience. Po dealt their disregard well, although more often than not Mr. Ping would come downstairs in the middle of the night to find his son eating his big, sensitive heart out. Po didn't often let harsh words from strangers get to him, but when regulars and acquaintances lost their patience it always cut him. His muteness had become a part of who he was, and to be disregarded or insulted for a thing he couldn't help hurt

deeply. Even his dad would occasionally look at him with sad eyes, but he was by far the only person in the Valley who treated Po without pity or condescension.

In deference to his dad's noodle obsession, Po had managed to keep his passion for all things kung fu a secret, for the most part. Ping knew, of course, since Po often would come back from the market with a scroll or poster about the Jade Palace, but to Ping kung fu was a phase, like tofu had been for him; a silly dream in a young and crazy mind. So when several of the Palace employees went around putting up posters for the choosing of the Dragon Warrior, Po only freaked out internally before calmly clapping his hands and gesturing to the poster.

“They're having a tournament over at the Jade Palace,” he signed to his dad.

“Oh! Excellent” if we hurry, we can be the first food cart there! Son, help me with this pot.”

Po forced himself not to bounce with excitement; he was going to the Jade Palace! He was going to witness one of the greatest events in the history of kung fu” maybe even in the history of China. The Dragon Warrior was a legend, a bringer of peace and balance, and as Po helped his dad stock up the noodle cart he wondered what, exactly, was the occasion. After nearly a thousand years, something must have happened to push Master Oogway to choose him or her. These things didn't just happen because someone said ‘Oh, it's the second Sunday of the third month in the year of the rat and I'm bored, why not’; the Dragon Warrior was serious business, and something big must have happened to finally push Oogway into choosing them.

Po laboriously panda-handled the cart up the steps, rather glad that his father had stayed to serve soup to the elderly and others who chose not to attend the tournament. Paws full with hauling the cart, Po wouldn't have been able to talk with him anyway, but thinking about kung fu around his dad always felt a little traitorous, as if the goose could tell his son's mind was focused more on ancient fighting techniques than how to make a good vegetable stock. More than once Po had inadvertently swung his ladle like a sword, chopping at a foe only he could see, and found his dad looking at him like he was crazy. Which he was, but only about kung fu. He supposed obsessing over an occupation ran in the family.

Po shook himself out of his head and looked down to see his progress” only to find himself maybe thirty feet up the stairs. A wave of shock and disappointment broke over him and if he could have screamed he would have shaken the very rock. Po fell backward onto the stairs, clawing at his face with heavy paws.

It would have been a good scream. Birds would have been shaken from trees, wondering what the sound was. Master Shifu would probably have come down to check.

Po dug the heels of his palms into his eyes, wanting to sink into the rock in disappointment. The sound of trotters on stone made him look up, bright sunlight searing his eyes; two pigs who were regulars at the shop were running past him. One of them paused and patted him on the shoulder.

"Maybe next time, Po," he said.

Which was \_extremely unhelpful\_, since there wouldn't \_be\_ a next time.

Po startled, sitting up straight. There wouldn't be a next time. This was his \_only\_ \_chance\_ to see the Dragon Warrior being chosen, maybe his only chance to really see the Furious Five.

He glanced over to the noodle cart sitting innocently on the stairs, making his decision. He untied his apron, draped it over the side of the cart, and set his hat down on top, before turning around and sprinting up the stairs as fast as his legs could carry him.

Which, despite having passed the pigs, wasn't very far. The high noon sun seared into his back, soaking into his heavy fur until he felt like he was sitting on the surface of the sun itself. He slowed to a walk, then a stop. The pigs, looking very confused, walked right past him again. Po took a deep breath, pushed himself up, and followed.

He made it up the stairs maybe two hundred yards and five minutes after the pigs, hauling himself up on his paws and knees until he could fling himself onto the top of the staircase, a silent, triumphant laugh bouncing in his throat. He lay at the very edge of the Thousand Steps, just catching his breath, when a creaking made him too to his right.

The great red gate of the Arena was closing.

\_No! No, no, no no noâ€¦!\_

Po scrambled to his feet, slipping on sand and gravel in his haste to get to the doors, which shut just as he reached them. He barely escaped smashing his face into the wood, and knocked as heavily as he could, to no avail. The doors were shut, the tournament beginning, and no one knew he was out there. His eyes darted around, looking for another entrance and he noticed a small opening in the wall. He backed away from the door and jumped, grabbing onto the edge of the window and peering as best he could into the arena. Most of the village was packed in there, and Po could see a tiny red panda and a larger tortoise on the platform in front.

"â€¦It is my great pleasure to present to you: Monkey; Mantis; Crane; Viper; Tigress: The Furious Five!"

>Po's heart swooped in excitement. The crowd chanted joyfully as the warriors suddenly dropped from the sky, briefly demonstrating their individual techniques. Po scrambled as hard as he could to get a better view, before a gust of wind from Master Crane's wings dislodged something and forced a wooden shutter to close over the small window. Po fell backward and rolled, painfully landing on his face. His left eye stung a bit, but he quickly crawled back to the gate, trying to get a look through a hole in the door. Master Crane was up first; Po recognized the contraption he was battling as the Thousand Tongues of Fire, a series of small rockets that required much still and agility to avoid.<p>

Then some pig moved in the way.

Po hit his fist against the door, trying to alert him, but the noise

in the Arena was too great, and it didn't work.

'Not working' was a trend that continued with every effort Po made to get into the Arena. He tried to punch through the door (\_never again),\_ spring up with a bamboo pole, and finally vault up with a whole \_bunch\_ of bamboo poles, and he eventually had to accept the fact that he wasn't going to get in. He sat on the top of the Thousand Stairs, absently rubbing a stubbed toe, disappointment roiling in his gut. A thousand years of waiting to see the greatest event in kung fu history, and he missed it. The big, fat panda who couldn't get up the stairs without wanting to throw up. It had been stupid to even try.

Behind him, the crowd cheered on and on for their heroes.

"And finally," came Master Shifu's rough voice, "Master Tigress!"

>Po jolted and looked around with a shock of sudden desperation. There was no way in <em>hell</em> that he was going to \_miss his only opportunity to see Master Tigress kick butt\_. He darted around, trying to find \_something\_ else he could do, and his eyes fell the tree beside the wall of the arena. He grabbed a rope from a stall of firework, snagged the nearest branch, and \_hailed.\_

"Believe me, citizens," called Shifu. "You have not seen \_anything\_ yet!"

><em>I KNOW, </em>Po screamed to himself, snarling. He pulled the rope over his shoulder until the tree bent nearly to the ground, then used the tension to launch himself in the air. He flew over the edge of the wall and there was Tigress, stance ready, about to fight the Blades of Death. Po just barely saw her lunge at the machine before he smacked into the top of the Arena gate, missed grabbing the edge, and fell onto the fireworks cart. He lay there in defeat, limbs aching, until he heard Shifu yell again.

"Citizens of the Valley of Peace, Master Oogway will now choose the Dragon Warrior!"

>The crowd cheered and Po punched his fists into the air, cursing to himself. He made to get up, grabbing at a firework that poked him in the backside, and then froze.<p>

\_The fireworks\_.

Po grabbed another rope from the cart and took the chair beside it, quickly tying rockets to the legs and back and knotting the fuses together as best he could. \_Just like how Master Flying Rhino got his name,\_ he thought triumphantly. He sat down in the seat and struck a match, lighting the twisted fuses just as his dad came running up the stairs, a little noodle hat in his wings.

"PO! What are you \_doing!\_"\_

Ping scampered forward and began blowing out the fuses. Po hurriedly waved him away. \_I'm going to see the Dragon Warrior, \_he signed urgently, \_This is my dream, Dad\_. Ping made a strangled noise in his throat.

"But I don't understand; what about the shop? What about the \_noodles?" \_Po clenched his eyes shut at the disappointment and confusion on his father's face.



\_Dad, there's nothing wrong with the shop, butâ€|\_

â€|The fuses were almost burned to the endâ€|

â€|\_I love kung fu!\_

Po grabbed the seat of the chair, waiting to be rocketed up, determinately not looking at his dad.

And waiting.

Andâ€|waiting.

Ping looked from the chair to Po, a little, disappointed grimace on his beak.

"Come on, son," he said, not unkindly. "Let's get back to work."

>Po sighed, his nose stinging, but he blinked the tears back. He nodded and made to stand â€" <p>

- And the rockets burst into life, throwing him forward into the wall with a painful jolt. He heard his dad yelling as he was launched into the air, far, far higher than he had thought he would go, and the chair beneath him disintegrated into ash. Po waved his arms as he fell closer and closer to the stone floor of the Arena, the figures below growing larger, and then everything went black.

\* \* \*

><p>Tigress looked up and jumped backward just in time to avoid a huge black-and-white mass, which slammed onto the stone in front of her with a cloud of ash and smoke. Annoyance and astonishment muddled together in her mind as she looked upon an unconscious panda, the first panda she'd actually ever seen. The other four leaned close to him, and Tigress suddenly wondered if he was dead. Mantis gave him a jab between the eyes, and he twitched. The panda made a very soft sound, then fell quiet, blinking painfully at the Masters. He turned his head to the side, and peered directly at the point of Master Oogway's outstretched claw. Tigress felt a jolt of cold excitement. Oogway had been about to point at <em>her<em>.

Suddenly the panda waved his paws and fumbled at the numerous pockets of his breeches, fingers shaking. He sifted through several small and battered cards, each printed back-and-front with a different word or phrase, and Tigress realized that the panda was mute. He held up a card that stated \_I am very sorry/a thousand pardons\_ before replacing it with another that said, in a messier scrawl, \_Has the Dragon Warrior been chosen?\_ , and then \_another\_ that read \_I am just curious\_. Oogway, his hand still outstretched, bent down a little, smiling.

"How interestingâ€|." He muttered. Tigress felt she needed to get things clarified, and stepped forward.

"Master, a-are you pointing at me," she said, silently cursing herself for her stutter. The panda, standing up with care, nodded enthusiastically, but Oogway shook his head.

"Him," he said. The panda's brow furrowed, and he shifted to the right; the claw followed him. He shifted back, and it followed him again. He pressed a hand against his chest, the other outstretched questioningly. Oogway smiled.

"Yes, you," he said, moving forward. Tigress stepped back in deference, painful disappointment burning through her. He could not honestly be serious. Oogway raised the bear's left arm with his staff, several cards fluttering from the beast's fingers.

"The Universe has brought us the Dragon Warrior!"  
>Tigress felt herself snarl in anger and was almost too pissed off to care. The <em>panda</em> was the \_Dragon Warrior.\_ After twenty years of dedication, of self-isolation and broken bones, only to be humiliated by the first idiot who fell in front of her?

The air filled with thousands of colorful scraps of paper and Tigress watched them fall, heart pounding with a sickening rage as the crowd cheered and screamed around them. Shifu ran down the stairs and she automatically bowed with the others, like the \_damn perfect\_ student she was...

â€|\_But still not good enough, eh?\_

Tigress felt something cold slide into her belly and forced herself to stop shaking. In her periphery she noticed the panda loading his immense bulk onto a dragon-shaped palanquin, and she clenched her paws tight. To her right, Crane kept throwing nervous glances at her, and she had to hold back the puerile urge to punch him. If she truly was not going to be the Dragon Warrior then she wasn't going to further embarrass herself by being a child about it. Whether or not this was a mistake, she could and would accept it with dignity.

The geese carted the panda away as Master Shifu ran to Grandmaster Oogway and began to argue with him. A warm bloom of shame and disappointment sprouted in Tigress's chest at the sight of him, but to her surprise he argued \_for\_ her, trying to get Oogway to change his mind.

"Master, wait! That flabby panda cannot be the answer to our \_problem\_â€|"

>Tigress looked up for a moment. Problem? What problem?<p>

"You were about to point at \_Tigress\_ and thatâ€|\_THING\_ fell in front of her â€" that was just an accident!"

>"There are no accidents," said Oogway sagely, just as the panda's weight broke the palanquin. Tigress sighed and walked over to where Shifu was frozen, still gesturing angrily to Oogway's retreating figure. She dropped to one knee and pressed her fist into her palm; the others followed suit.<br>"Forgive us, Master," she said. "We have failed you."

"No," said Shifu, stopping her. "If the panda has not quit by morning, then I will have failed \_you\_."

Tigress, trying not to let her surprise show, nodded and straightened.

"You all should get back to training," Shifu continued, looking towards the stairway, where the Palace's geese and pigs were slowly

hauling the panda toward the Sacred Hall of Warriors.

"I will talk to the panda and find out exactly what we have to deal with. We will join you later in the training hall."

>Tigress felt a jolt of wariness as he walked away, and looked at her fellow Masters; by their eyes, they felt it too. Surely Shifu wouldn't expect the bear to navigate the obstacle course.<p>

She exchanged glances with Viper as they walked out of the arena.

"He wouldn't, would he?"

>Tigress said nothing. After nearly twenty years serving Shifu, training under him, and experiencing his harsh teaching methods, she knew that he would.<p>

"Whatcha lookin' at, buddy?"

Tigress turned to where Mantis was crouched on Monkey's shoulder. Monkey had several of what Tigress recognized as the panda's phrase cards in his hands, most likely the ones he had dropped at Oogway's announcement. Tigress moved until she was climbing the stairs beside Monkey, and peered over his shoulder to see. He handed the cards to her. The characters written were very readable and carefully drawn, and all seemed to be in a category of apologies and explanations:

\_I am very sorry/a thousand pardons\_

\_I apologize\_

\_Excuse me\_

\_Excuse me, may I pass?\_

\_I was just curious\_

\_May I look at this?\_

\_My condolences for your loss\_

\_Please excuse me, I am mute\_

\_My apologies, I did not mean to pry\_

Tigress straightened the cards before handing them to Crane to look at.

"So, he really is mute," Crane muttered, fluttering gently up the stairs to the Training Hall as he examined the cards.

"A mute Dragon Warrior?" said Viper.

"Okay, I am kinda bummed about not being picked, but you have to admit that his entrance was pretty cool," said Mantis.

"Where did he come from," asked Monkey. "So high in the sky â€" panda's don't fly."

>"Leave the poetry to me, please," murmured Crane as he gave the cards back to Tigress. She tucked them into her vest.<p>

"We will see what he is capable of when Shifu brings him to train," she said quietly. The others fell silent, and they walked without further conversation to the training grounds. Upon entering the doors Tigress felt a wave of exhaustion and disappointment; twenty years these grounds had soaked up her sweat and blood and every ounce of hope, and when the chance to become great had come â€"

\_when the chance to make Shifu proud had come\_

Tigress punched at the Swinging Clubs until the cruel little voice was drowned in adrenalin. With blood pumping and muscles working she felt like herself again, ready to take on any challenge that came her way, even â€" as Shifu and the panda came through the doors â€" a Dragon Warrior. She smashed a club that came at her and splintered it, chunks flying as she leapt off the spinning logs and cooled down on the side with the others. One of the chunks hit the panda square on the head; he opened his mouth in a silent gasp, patting his forehead gingerly. Shifu ignored him.

"Shall we begin, then?"

The panda looked at the opened obstacle course with apprehension. He dug through a pocket and held up a card.

\_Is now a good time?

><em>"Yes, panda, \_now.\_ Unless you believe that the great Oogway was wrong, and you are not the Dragon Warrior?"

Another card: \_It could go either way.\_

Crane tilted his head to Tigress.

"Does he have a card for everything, you think?" he whispered.

"Then we should test your abilities and see, shouldn't we," said Shifu, beginning to walk to the side. The panda followed him while scribbling on a blank card. He jogged in front of Shifu and held it up.

\_But I don't know any kung fu!\_

"Excellent," said Shifu darkly. He walked over to the Adversary and motioned to it.

"Then we can begin immediately. Punch it."

>But the panda wasn't looking at the dummy: he was looking at the Five. His face lit up and he scrambled around his pockets, making odd, fast gestures with his paws and fingers. He pulled out a set of much newer-looking cards and held them up.<p>

\_This is incredible!\_

\_It is such an honor to meet you!\_

\_I am a huge fan!\_

He started to hold up a card that said \_Can I have your autograph?\_ but Shifu snatched the cards from his fingers, tossing them behind him. The panda retracted his paws, holding them against his chest, a very shocked, oddly fearful look on his face.

"Concentrate and punch the dummy, panda," Shifu said harshly. The bear looked at him and the thrown-away cards with hurt eyes, but obediently turned toward the Adversary. His twitched uncertainly, miming a small punch with a questioning look.

"Just hit it," said Shifu.

The panda gently tapped the Adversary on its painted face before withdrawing his hand, eyes darting from the Five to Shifu. The red panda's ears drew downward angrily.

"Why don't you try again," he said, his soft tone belying the annoyance Tigress could sense. "A little harder this time."  
>The panda smiled at him and punched the dummy hard enough to send it rocking back against the floor, but he had hit it in the face instead of in the middle; the dummy, weighted just for this, sprang back up and smashed into him, sending him flying backward into the pit. The serpent logs began to turn as he landed on them and Tigress started forward, intending to pull him out before he hurt himself. Shifu immediately blocked her and she felt a glimmer of concern; was he really willing to injure the panda to make him leave?<p>

The Swinging Clubs of Instant Oblivion dropped down from the rafters and she and the others gasped; Shifu looked on in apparent unconcern. Apparently, he was willing to kill the panda to make him leave. Tigress tensed herself to interfere if it became necessary, but the panda made it off the serpent logs without getting impaled, the back of a club smashing into his torso and throwing him into the bowl of the Jade Tortoise. He bounced around as the Tortoise rolled with his weight, and Shifu followed his movements with his eyes, chuckling.

"This will be easier than I thought," he said to himself. They watched as the panda was rolled out of the bowl, clutching his stomach in nausea. He stumbled forward into the Gauntlet of Wooden Warriors, where he was smacked, slapped, and hit mercilessly; the leg of a warrior even jabbed him in the groin, which made even Shifu flinch. The panda fell to his knees but did not make a sound; he clutched at an arm for support and found himself being smacked again, until the forest of punishing limbs forced him out the other side. Clutching at his head and chest, he stumbled up the steps to the Field of Fiery Death, expression pained, but he fell back when a flame shot up in his face. The panda missed the steps and tumbled to the ground, and then scrambled backward on his paws and backside until he was pressed between the lower wall of the Field and the wall of the pit, where he crouched with his knees to his chest and paws pressed against his mouth, looking terrified to the point of tears.

Something inside Tigress froze at the sight of the panda covering his mouth with fear in his eyes, as if he was afraid of making a sound. Beside her, the others glanced around with solemn faces. The bear was not mute by birth, it was clear; something had happened to force him into silence, and by the panic in his face, fire had been a contributing factor.

Shifu was down in the pit before Tigress or anyone could do something, and he hauled the bear to his feet.

"Enough of this, panda," he said, pushing him toward the stairs. "The Dragon Warrior isn't afraid of a little thing like fire. Now go!"

>"Master, perhaps he has demonstrated his skills enough?" chimed Viper, slithering to the edge of the pit. Shifu pointed his flute at the Field.<p>

"A great warrior cannot be held back by something like fear," he growled, motioning again to the Field. "Complete the course, panda!"

The poor beast looked trapped, gesturing haltingly at Shifu but not pulling out further cards. Shifu stepped down off the stairs and jumped up onto the main floor, limping away without a backward glance at the confused and distressed bear.

"Then there is no more I can do. No warrior can be so easily disabled, especially the Dragon Warrior." Tigress noticed a slight smirk on his face as he crossed the floor to the door. "You Five should get to bed. We have another long day of training tomorrow."

The Five stared at his retreating figure, until a soft sigh turned their heads. The panda was staring confusedly at the Fiery Field, as if he didn't understand why he had been afraid of it. Monkey swung to the edge of the pit and stretched out his arm, but the bear waved him off, sitting down on the steps with a dark look on his face. Monkey turned to the others, and Tigress shook her head, walking away. If the panda wanted to stay and get out himself, he could. She motioned to Mantis with a nod to the bear. He grimaced, but hopped forward.

"Uh, if you want to practice some more, I can stay and make sure"

><em>That you don't hurt yourself <em>silently lingered in the air. The panda held a paw to his chest in thanks but gently tapped himself on the head and gestured to the stairs. \_Thanks, but I'm just going to sit and think\_, he clearly said.

"Alright then" said Mantis. Tigress led the others out the door, a final glance showing the panda with his head in his paws, heavy breaths shaking his shoulders.

\* \* \*

><p>It took Po a lot less time to get out of the pit than he thought it would; apparently there were several geese who operated the machinery of the spinning logs and the Fiery Field, and one of them silently slid back a small door in the wall and set down a stepladder. He waved a paw to thank the goose but she disappeared back into the wall. Po dropped his hand and stood; there was no reason to linger, and he just wanted to go to bed. His brush with the Field of Fiery Death had shaken him beyond his understanding; he'd never been afraid of fire before. He knew that there had been several fires started when Tai Lung had wrecked the village, but he didn't remember much of the attack, only that the day before he could talk and the day after found it impossible. The reaction he'd had to the sudden flame in his face unnerved him; he'd felt like something was going to get him if he didn't hide and stay quiet, never minding that he hadn't made a sound for twenty years. What was going to get him?

Tai Lung? He felt a little uneasy at the thought of the snow leopard, but certainly not terrified.<p>

As he walked along the staircase that led to the barracks, he thought about the events of the day. Was he really supposed to be the Dragon Warrior? Sure, he'd always dreamed of becoming a legendary kung fu master, but they had just been dreams; never had he thought that they might one day become reality. Judging by how horribly he had been beaten by the obstacle course, Po could safely guess that he had been right.

He shook himself and continued up the stairs, refusing to be too discouraged. Even if he had failed at the obstacle course, he still had met his heroes; Master Mantis had offered to spot him; Viper had even spoken up for him. A thrill of excitement coursed through him and he entered the barracks with a lighter heart, navigating the hallways until he found one that looked like it contained bedrooms.

He paused at the entrance, seeing the very edge of a light being blown out. He had no idea which room was his. Po decided to just take one of the ones in the middle and hope he didn't end up disturbing anyone, and then he stepped out into the hallway.

The floorboards immediately groaned under his weight. He stepped again, and they creaked again. Starting to despair, he set his foot down as gently as possibleâ€|

â€|and the floorboard broke. Po put the pieces back haphazardly and shuffled along the corridor, squeaks and creaks following his every footstep before he desperately backed into a random room, which, to his utter embarrassment, turned out to be occupied.

By Master Crane.

Po waved and tried to smile. Crane nodded back, looking very tired. Po held up his hands, attempting to apologize, but he realized that his apology cards were probably still in the arena where they had fallen. He fumbled for a blank card and his pencil, but Crane made a small noise.

"Oh! Yeah, um, these are yours."

He picked up a small pack of cards from the floor and handed them to the panda. They were his special Getting-to-Meet-the-Furious-Five cards that he had saved in his pocket for years, never having had the occasion to use them before. Po smiled and held up a few.

Big fan!\_

You were amazing at the Battle of Weeping River!\_

Crane smiled slightly, and Po tried to hold back his excitement. He was actually talking (more or less) to one of the Furious Five! He grabbed a blank card and started to scribble, wishing he had made his Furious Five pack more detailed, when Crane said:

"Um, look, you don't really belong hereâ€|"

>Po clutched at his pencil and sighed, writing *I know.* He held up a card that said My whole life I've dreamed of learning kung

fu! \_Crane shuffled a bit, awkwardly glancing around the room.

"No, uh, that's notâ€¦I mean, you don't belong \_here.\_ I mean in this room."

>He gestured with his wing to the paper walls and patted his mat with a foot.<p>

"This is \_my\_ room," he said. "Property of Crane."

Po almost smacked himself. He put one paw to his chest and bowed his head to apologize, which Crane thankfully understood. Backing out of the door, again, he waved in goodbye and heard Crane sigh quietly when he closed the door.

\_Seemed a little bit awkward, \_he thought to himself. He creaked along the corridor again, trying to keep as quiet as possible, when a door to his right opened, and Master Tigress stood silhouetted in moonlight. Po felt his heart flutter and hurriedly dug for his cards, but Master Tigress held out a paw.

"You don't belong here," she said quietly. Po nodded and pointed over his shoulder to Crane's room, then to hers, trying to say \_Yes, sorry, I know this is your room.\_ Tigress waved him down.

"I mean, you don't belong at the Jade Palace." Po's heart fell. Tigress stepped forward a bit.

"You are not a warrior, and I doubt you will do more than disgrace us and yourself, so if you have any respect for who we are and what we do, you will be gone by morning."

>She retreated back into her room and shut the door in Po's astonished face. A little bit of his heart felt like it was being cut away; his hero of heroes didn't think he should be there. Po pulled out his Furious Five cards with shaking paws and crouched, sliding one under the door before turning and leaving the corridor.<p>

\_Big fan!\_

\* \* \*

><p>Po walked without destination, a warm night breeze rustling at his fur, simply wanting to get moving and get away.<p>

The Five \_hated \_him. He may not have been the most observant person in the world, but even he could tell that Master Crane had wanted nothing more than for him to leave during their impromptu conversation.

The others, though they weren't openly hostile or insulting, still were incredibly put off by his presence. They were Masters of kung fu and therefore were obliged to act with honor and dignity, but Po knew they didn't like him being there, and he couldn't blame them. The title of Dragon Warrior was the most prestigious in China; the only reason it wasn't considered better than Emperor was because emperors tended to get shirty about that kind of thing. The Five had trained long and hard, only to get their hopes dashed by one idiot on a rocket-chair.

And \_Tigress\_â€¦|.



Po, having walked absently up a long staircase, saw the mountain fall away into a long view of the Valley and its surrounding mountains, framed on one side by a peach tree in full blossom. The branches were heavily laden with fruit, and Po plucked an armful without thinking about it, sitting down on the edge of the rock.

â€|Tigress had been his favorite since the Furious Five had first been formed. Ever since he had seen her by the woods, fighting off a huge boar that threatened the village, he had been struck with admiration for her, not to even mention kung fu itself. To hear her, out of everybody, tell him that he should leave hit him harder than any machine in the Training Hall. Maybe he should. Perhaps it would be better for everybody...

"Ah, I see you have found the Sacred Peach Tree of Heavenly Wisdom!"

Po scrambled to his feet, dropping his armful of peaches as he quickly swallowed the one in his mouth. Grandmaster Oogway himself, creator of kung fu, was smiling at him from the stairs, a bright orange lantern held in one claw. Po smacked himself in the face and fumbled around for his apology cards, remembering with a heavy dread that he had lost them. He turned to Oogway to gesture an apology, but Oogway calmly waved him off.

"Do not despair, young panda. That peach tree has been there since long before you were born, and will continue for many more years. It does not need to keep every peach."

>The panda looked guiltily at the small pile of fruit at his feet.  
<em>I'm sorry<em>, he gestured.

"I understand," said Oogway, reaching the top of the stairs. "You eat when you are upset."

><em>Upset, me?<em> Po gestured with a hot feeling of frustration, knowing full well that the tortoise wouldn't know his signs. \_I am not upset. Why would you think I'm upset? \_

Oogway blinked slowly at him.

"So, why are you upset?" He asked. Po stared at him; had he truly understood that? Or was he simply guessing? Oogway didn't look inclined to explain, and Po finally sighed and nodded in the direction of the Training Hall.

\_I messed up more than anybody in the history of kung fu - \_he spread his arms wide - \_In the history of China â€" \_he clawed his fingers into the air â€" \_in the history of messing up!\_

Po turned away from Oogway and sat by his pile of peaches, looking out onto the quiet Valley.

\_I'm not like the others, \_he signed. \_I'm too big, and I'm too heavy. I don't have claws, or wings, or venom; even Mantis has those..\_

â€|Po honestly didn't have a sign for Mantis'sâ€|whatever-they-were.

...\_Even Mantis has thoseâ€|thingies. And even if I did, I'd still be too big, and too heavyâ€|and too silent. Maybe I should just quit,

and go back to making noodles.\_

Behind him, Oogway shuffled softly.

"Quit, don't quitâ€|" Po turned around in surprise, his eyes wide.

"Noodles, don't noodlesâ€|" The old tortoise grinned at Po's amazement, and pointed at him with a claw.

"You are too concerned with what you think holds you back. Look at where you are now, young panda."

He pointed the crooked top of his staff to the stunning view of the Valley, a sight that few in the village below ever saw. A glimmer of understanding crept into Po's head.

"Do not worry about what was or what will be," said Oogway. "There's a saying: 'Yesterday is history; tomorrow is a mystery; but today is a gift. That is why'," he turned and began to walk back across the rock. "'It is called the present.'"

Oogway lightly tapped his staff against the trunk of the tree, and a peach fell directly into Po's lap. He watched the lamplight fade from the tortoise's back, rubbing the peach with his thumb, then pulled out the cards that Crane had returned to him, turning them over in his paw.

He had wanted to become a kung fu warrior since he fell in love with the art at seventeen, and he was in a time and a place where he finally had the opportunity. Nothing, he decided, as he bit into the sweet peach and headed back down the stairs, is going to hold me back from trying.

\* \* \*

><p>AN: Apologies if things get a little confusing. To clarify, when a sentence talks like this, it indicates that Po is holding up a card that says that word or phrase, or gesturing. Sometimes I use italics to also convey thoughts, but in Po's case it's indicating what he's saying with his cards or gestures. It just gets a little repetitive to type 'he held up a card' every time he says something.

I like to think that Po's sign language is fairly straightforward and literal in the gestures, though they rely quite a bit on context. Slashing the hand across the chest could mean stop or to quit or to get rid of, depending on what comes before and after. This had nothing to do with how the hell Oogway knew what he was saying; Oogway is interpreting Po's language through sheer cosmic energy and communion with the universe. Oogway for the win.

I wanted Shifu snatching away Po's cards to be a big deal. The cards are the only way Po can communicate with people, because nobody else knows his sign language but Ping, and to take away his cards is basically denying him the right to communicate, and would feel rather violating to Po. Especially when it wasn't even Shifu he was using them to communicate with.

I do like Shifu, but I also think he's a bit of an asshole and I

don't always agree with his actions. Making him be mean is oddly cathartic for me, and certainly not very out-of-character for him. I think that Po continuously pulling out cards in order to communicate would severely annoy him, and he's going to be rather meaner here than he was in the film.

The Five and especially Tigress don't have quite the dislike they originally had for him because he doesn't make nearly the fool of himself here as he does in the film. I mean honestly, he \_smack talked the training dummy. Who does that.\_ Po is a very expressive person and he normally demonstrates this with his chatter and very loose manner of speech, but he can't do that here, and so much of his exuberance, over-enthusiasm, and silliness doesn't show, making him significantly less comedic and foolish-looking. He's still the same panda, but has been forced to be more reserved and to bottle much of his playful personality, and his silence forces him to listen more to other people, picking up on things that he ordinarily would have missed.

Remember that Po here was a little older when Shen attacked. He's not afraid of regular fire or things like torches, but a real blaze or sudden flames all up in his face would be a trigger for him, even if he has suppressed the memories. I don't want him to really remember Shen's attack \_or\_ even Tai Lung's; he's unconsciously internalized his trauma to the point where both incidents are completely repressed â€" almost. Forgetting and repression are common occurrences in trauma or abuse cases, and a person can be completely oblivious to what happened up until something triggers them.

I've been reading about speech disorders and apparently the 'kid won't talk after traumatic event' is much more common in media than in real life. Since this is a fanfiction about a kung fu-fighting panda, I'm not going to fight this. So let's say that when Po was itty bitty a part of his brain said that talking was unsafe and if he spoke something was going to get him. This came back after TL's attack, which reminded him of the \_first\_ trauma (Shen's attack) and flicked that little switch again. It's an anxiety thing. He's probably not even sure \_why\_ he doesn't talk, it's been so long. I'll get him talking again, but he's going to have to build up a lot of confidence and a feeling of safety before he chirps. If anybody knows more about muteness and mutism, I'm all ears.

The 'Master Flying Rhino using a rocket chair to earn his title' was a reference to Luna Goldsun's fanfiction *Memoirs of a Master*, which is an incredibly gripping tale of Shifu's life from childhood to past the first movie. 10/10 would read - and laugh, and cry, and sob, and wail - again.

### 3. Chapter 3

A/N: This AU is going to be put into a separate story, *The Silent Dragon*. I'll leave these three parts up on 100 Drabbles for a month or so, then I'll delete them.

\* \* \*

><p> Tigress wasn't sure what she expected when she greeted Shifu the next morning, but she wasn't very surprised to see the panda's room empty and unused. She wasn't quite sure how she felt about him being

gone; a bit disappointed, perhaps. He had taken the title from her and from the others, and hadn't even tried to stay and honor it; but she couldn't exactly blame him, since leaving was exactly what both Shifu and herself had tried to make him do.<p>

The crisp edge of the card he had slid under her door poked against her stomach, tucked into her vest with the others. Something like guilt stained her thoughts, but she brushed it aside. The panda had not been more worthy of the title of Dragon Warrior than her. How was he even to take on the roll? It had been made perfectly clear that, though he may have been a \_fan\_ of kung fu, he didn't know it himself. What was he going to do, stand in front of a charging hoard of bandits and wave a polite card at them?

As the Five and Shifu made their way to the training grounds, she forced herself to forget any pity she might have had for the panda. With him gone, now she had an opportunity to try again; Oogway would have to choose someone else, and it wasn't too far off the mark to assume that she was the best candidate.

Although a little bit of her burned and soured at the thought of being second choice to the panda.

\_Second choice as Dragon Warrior, second place as Shifu's childâ€¦!\_

The urge to punch something grew stronger, and Tigress was glad they were almost at the Training Hall. She would show Shifu that she was capable of handling the challenges that would surely face any chosen as Dragon Warrior.

Her plans, however, were dashed into the ground when Shifu opened the doors leading to the training grounds and revealed the panda struggling to get himself out of a split.

"What are you doing here?!" Shifu yelled. The panda turned around and bowed briefly, then drew out three cards, freshly written by the look of the paper and less carefully-drawn characters.

\_Good morning, Master.\_

\_Warming up\_

\_How shall we train today?\_

The panda withdrew the cards and turned away, trying to look as though he was actually stretching.

"Just stop," said Shifu angrily. "You're stuck."  
>The panda tensed, but nodded, head down.<p>

"Help him," said Shifu to Crane.

"Oh, dearâ€¦!" Crane stepped forward and grabbed the back of the panda's breeches. He flapped his wings as hard as he could and pulled, and the panda tipped over the side and landed on his back. He stood quickly and drew another card.

\_Thank you.\_

"Don't worry about it," Crane said, rejoining the group. Shifu limped toward the bear.

"You truly believed that you could learn to do a full split in one night?" He grabbed two stone discs and threw them into the air; Tigress's eyes followed them and she crouched, ready to spring and show the panda what he was really up against.

"It takes years to develop one's flexibility!"  
>As the discs reached their peak, she jumped and spun before kicking out and breaking both discs simultaneously.<p>

"And years longer to apply it in combat."

She landed on all fours, the panda staring at her with a dumbfounded look. A chunk of stone hit him on the head and he carefully picked it up, trying to hide it behind his back.

"Put that \_down!\_" cried Shifu. "The only souvenirs we collect here are bloody knuckles and broken bones."  
>The bear dropped the rock, eagerly nodding.<p>

\_Excellent!  
>I am ready to train.<em>

\_How shall we train today?\_

He hesitated, and then drew out a fourth card.

\_Please don't kill me and make it look like an accident.\_

Mantis howled. Monkey clapped his hand over his mouth, turning away to laugh, and even Crane and Viper chuckled. Shifu clenched his hand around his flute, nearly breaking it. He smiled rather cruelly.

"No promises," he said. "Let's get started. Move this out of the way."

He waved at the equipment the panda was using to 'warm up'. Monkey and Tigress started forward but the panda was already there, dragging the equipment to the side. Shifu gestured for the Five to go to the middle of the sparring grounds.

"Viper, you first, then Monkey, Crane, and Mantis. I want him to realize exactly how difficult this is going to be."

Tigress didn't argue when he left her out. She was angry enough to cause some serious damage to the bear, and she didn't want to risk losing her temper, perfectly happy to watch the others teach him his place. The panda jogged over from the side and stood where Shifu gestured, Tigress and the others off to the side. Viper slithered in front of the bear.

"Are you ready," she asked. The panda nodded enthusiastically, drawing his arms up in a mockery of a battle stance. Viper's tail smacked him in the face, threw him into the air, and then slapped him back down again, where he landed upside-down on his shoulders, wincing in pain. She slid toward him, a hint of concern in her voice.

"I'm sorry, brother, I thought you were ready-"

>The panda waved her off, a huge grin on his face. He righted himself and saluted, looking extremely happy for someone who just got beaten to the ground. Shifu's ears angrily twitched and he snapped his fingers; Viper retreated and Monkey stepped forward. He gave the panda a long bamboo staff, and then stood back, ready, waiting until the panda smiled and nodded. Monkey instantly started forward, swinging his own staff with whistling speed, hitting the panda in every unprotected spot. The bear winced with every hit, though he looked rather excited when one accidentally connected with his staff, but he fell over when Monkey smacked him on the head. Monkey stood his staff on the panda's stomach and balanced on top, grinning down at the bear, who grinned back.<p>

"Had enough," Monkey asked. The panda shook his head and tried to slap the staff from under Monkey, but the simian jumped off, ready to resume the fight, until Shifu snapped his fingers again. The red panda pointed to the Training Hall.

"We will work on your balance," he said quietly, his teeth grinding. Tigress could almost see him burning with rage, having expected the panda to give up when he got hurt. The Five followed Shifu and the panda into the Hall, where Shifu gestured to the Jade Tortoise of Wisdom. The Masters watched for a few sad minutes as the panda struggled to get up onto the bowl; Crane finally had to grab him under the arms and fly him to the rim. The panda wobbled a little bit as Crane touched down, but found his balance.

"Go," said Shifu. Crane peeked at the panda from under his hat, a wry grin on his beak, which faded when the panda lost balance and fell in to the bowl, bouncing around again. Shifu looked like he was about to scream; he raised his hand to snap his fingers, then paused, head turning. Tigress followed his gaze:

The Field of Fiery Death.

A cold shiver washed across her at the look Shifu gave the panda then. Although she wanted the panda gone as much as he did, surely making him face something he that had given him such a horrible reaction was overkill?

"Panda," Shifu called, a smile in his voice. The panda hooked his arms around the rim of the Tortoise and peeked over to Shifu, who pointed to the Fiery Field.

"No warrior can be crippled by fear," Shifu said sagely. "Go."  
>The panda looked at the Field with trepidation, but scrambled over the edge of the Tortoise, falling gracelessly to the ground. He righted himself and hesitated; he gestured to the Field, then to himself with a questioning look.<p>

Shifu walked across the floor until he was in front of the Field.

"If you are to be the Dragon Warrior, you must overcome this fear you have, and no better way to do so than by confronting it directly. Now get \_over\_ \_here."\_

The panda stepped around the Jade Tortoise and cautiously made his way up the stairs of the Fiery Field. The ducks operating the fire

began their work, flames shooting out from random poles across the platform. Shifu impatiently tapped his flute against his hand.

"We're waiting, panda," he said. The panda took a deep breath and then stepped onto the mass of poles, shuffling around nervously. A flame shot off to his left and he jumped back, right into the path of another, getting a burn on his breeches. He clenched his eyes in pain and quickly began to step around, trying to avoid the unpredictable fire. He got several mild burns but didn't look about to jump off until a flame shot up less than half a foot in front of him; the panda stumbled and fell, getting another burn on the back of his right arm. His face was in a rictus of fear and he seemed frozen in place, the fire dancing in his wide, watery eyes. Crane swooped down into the pit before Shifu could say anything and grabbed him up, a trail of smoke following them as he set the bear safely on the floor, where he curled into a ball, face pressed against his knees. Shifu angrily limped toward them and Tigress had the odd urge to hold him back before he could damage the panda further. Angry at the bear or not, their job was to protect the villagers, not traumatize them, even when said villager took away the greatest honor that could have been given them. It would be different if the panda was a Master and could protect himself, but an innocent civilian was not fair game.

Disciplined into unfailing obedience, Tigress did not step forward, but she prepared herself to if Shifu went too far. The others clearly shared her thoughts, because they tensed also. Crane stepped away from the panda and stood between him and Shifu, saluting respectfully.

"Master, maybe confronting this fear directly isn't the best course of action," Crane said cautiously. Shifu motioned him aside with his flute, and he reluctantly stepped between Tigress and Monkey. Shifu prodded the panda in the arm and he looked up, still breathing heavily. The Master opened his mouth to lecture him but the bear turned away from him and pulled out a pencil and a blank card, scribbling on it with a shaky paw.

"Panda, there is no time to deal with your deficiencies," said Shifu impatiently. "You must face the Field and overcome this fear, or you must leave. No warrior can be afraid of mere flames," he said harshly. The panda angrily screwed up his face, crumpled the card, and wrote on another one. He held it up between him and Shifu, who slapped it aside.

"Cease with the cards, you-"

>He stopped, looking at the card that he had smacked onto the floor. The panda carefully stood up, towering over Shifu. After a moment of tense silence, the Master waved his hand to the door.<p>

"You are more than free to leave," he said, voice tight with anger and something Tigress could not identify. He looked over at the confused Five, then began to walk away.

"You are dismissed," he said shortly, limping past the panda and calling down to the ducks who operated the machinery of the hall, telling them they could go home for the day. The panda absently rubbed a burn on his arm and nodded to the Five as he passed them on his way out the door.

After a few moments of silence, Mantis hopped onto Monkey's shoulder and broke the quiet.

"Well, that was interesting," he said. Crane stepped over to the fallen card as Monkey scratched his neck, looking over at the door Shifu left from.

"I wonder what made him stop," he said curiously. "I thought he was going to get real nasty."

"I've never seen Shifu like that," Viper said quietly.

"Tigress?" Tigress silently shook her head, not wishing to comment. She knew how antagonistic Shifu could be when he wanted, but had rarely seen him openly malicious, more often settling for a cold cruelty or disregard.

"Yeahâ€¦I think this would do it," said Crane solemnly; he held the fallen card up.

"Oh," said Mantis quietly.

\_Tai Lung's attack was the reason I have these 'deficiencies'\_, it read.

\* \* \*

><p>The panda didn't make it as far as they thought he had, his burns and various aches slowing him down, not that he was particularly fast-paced to begin with. Tigress left the others to unwind in their rooms, opting to meditate on the terrace behind the Palace, where she could see both the Training Hall and the barracks. It wasn't a particularly special or sacred place, or even very private, but she could see far across the fields and mountains to the east and south, and if she truly wished to not be disturbed she could easily climb onto the roof of the Palace and meditate there.<p>

She remembered the first time she had gotten caught doing just that, fortunately by Master Oogway instead of Shifu. She had been through a very long, hard day of training, every move of hers an apparent disappointment to the man who had given her a home, and she had slunk away in the falling evening to her favorite spot. She had thought that she had kept it a secret, and so was very surprised to find Master Oogway, of all people, slowly picking his way across the brightly-painted wood of the rooftop. Even though she had seen him fight, it never failed to amaze her when he did something \_other\_ than walk exceptionally slowly or cheerfully agitate Shifu with a choice piece of wisdom. He was so bulky, his limbs so heavy, his movements so slow, that any feat of speed or agility always surprised her. However the old tortoise had gotten onto the roof of the Palace, he still moved as slow and deliberately as usual to reach her. They had spent ten, maybe fifteen minutes talking about everything \_but\_ the horrible day Tigress had just been through, and when Oogway jumped down from the roof with the agility of a cat, she feltâ€¦perhaps not much betterâ€¦but less twisted in the gut than before. Just to have someone care enough about her being upset that they climbed onto a roof and talked about nothing had helped.

As she watched the night approach she noticed soft footfalls, accompanied by the tap of a staff. She opened her eyes and rose to bow, but Master Oogway waved a clawed hand at her, gesturing that she



should remain seated. She settled back down and he slowly sat at her side, laying the peach staff between them.

She didn't look at him, but she knew he was smiling.

>"I have always enjoyed this view of the Valley," he said softly.

"The other side is vast and grand, but from here I can see the mountain on which our home is built, and the foundations below. When I look across this viewâ€|"  
<br>He motioned to the mountain to their left, rising high above them.

"â€|I am reminded that we are not as lofty as we may think."

>Tigress glanced to where his hand was gesturing; in comparison to the mountain, the peak on which the Jade Palace stood was tiny in comparison, just a small outcropping of the main mountain.<p>

"So no matter what we do, we will never be as great as we hoped," she said, her words harder than she had intended. Oogway sighed softly, shaking his head.

>"Now, I didn't say that. Our home may be on a smaller cliff, but it is still a part of the mountain as a whole." He placed a hand on one knee and pushed himself up. Tigress expected him to leave, having doled out another indecipherable bit of wisdom, but she was surprised with the pressure of a hand on her shoulder.<p>

"You believe that I made the wrong choice," he said. It was not a question, but a statement. Tigress turned away, not answering as guilt welled in her. She heard Oogway chuckle.

"You are allowed to question, Tigress, even question \_me\_. Believing that I made a mistake is not sacrilege."

>He was quiet for a moment, looking out to the hills and fields and the tiny lights in distant buildings. Night had fallen around them, calm and clear. Below, she could see lights in both the Training Hall and the barracks. After a minute Oogway patted her shoulder, before turning to leave.<p>

"Though you may not be at the top of the mountain, do not forget that you are still a part of it, young Tigress. I do not believe the Universe is quite done with you, yet."

She watched him walk around the side of the Palace, undoubtedly going to the peach tree for his evening tai chi. What, exactly, was that supposed to mean?

Her thoughts were too jumbled to continue her meditation, and she leapt off the terrace, landing softly on the stairs below. Her mind buzzing with Oogway's words, she walked down the stairs to the barracks.

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><p>The other four of the Five caught up with Po just before he reached the barracks. Though he had a head start, his injuries had slowed him down, and when Master Mantis offered to try some acupuncture on him he readily agreed. Monkey and Crane continued to their own rooms, but Viper and Mantis joined Po in his.<p>

\_I forgot to thank you for helping me out yesterday.\_

Mantis waved away the card Po presented them, as he quickly drew a panda over his picture of Tigress's acupuncture points.

"Don't mention it, buddy," he said. "Shifu can get a little harsh sometimes."

>"Very harsh," said Viper quietly. She took the picture from Mantis and watched as he gathered a few needles into his claw-thingies. "I honestly haven't seen him that nasty in years."<br>"What, like from the White River Valley mission? Yeah, he was mean then."

>Po bounced around a bit, furiously writing on a blank card.<p>

\_He got mad at you for that mission? But you did fantastic! You stopped the warlord from hurting the villagers and saved everyone!\_

Viper smiled at him.

"How did you know that?"

><em>I've been a fan of kung fu since I was eighteen<em>, he said with a card.

\_My whole life I've dreamed of learning kung fu!\_

He hesitated, then wrote \_Never really like this, though.\_

Mantis chuckled as he hopped onto Po's shoulder.

"Guess it was as big a surprise for you as it was for us, huh?" Po began to nod, but the movement was aborted when Mantis jabbed a needle into his arm, making him flinch.

"Oops. Sorry. Lemme see that chart againâ€|"

>Po absently rubbed his shoulder.<p>

\_It's enough of an honor to be here at all.\_

"I dunno," said Mantis, climbing down the panda's spine. "We weren't exactly welcoming."

Scribbling on another card from his dwindling supply of blanks, Po shook his head.

\_Even if it didn't go so well, I still got to meet the Furious Five.\_

"You got \_beat up\_ by the Furious Five," muttered Viper wryly. Po shook his pencil at her. \_Furious Five. Worth it\_.

\_Besides, it wasn't that bad. You guys helped me out when Master Shifu got too rough.\_

"If you don't mind me askingâ€|"

said Viper quietly. Po nodded to her.

"That card you showed Shifu in the Training Hall. What it said."

>Mantis, crawling across Po's back, slowed slightly. Po wrote on the back of a used card, a determined frown on his face.<p>

\_I know that\_ \_how I am can get aggravating but if I can deal with

it, so can he.\_

Viper shook her head.

>"Actually, I meant what you said about Tai Lung. His attack reallyâ€|?"<p>

Po silently stared at her until she dropped her gaze.

"Sorry."

>Mantis chose that moment to stick a needle into Po's back, making him jump.<p>

\_I'm not sure that this is helping\_, he wrote.

"Trust me, it will," said Mantis, jumping down to get more needles.

"It's just not easy finding the right nerve points under all this, uhâ€|"

>Po gestured to his large belly. Mantis stuck a needle into his shoulder-blade, poking at the muscles in his back.<p>

"\_Fur\_," he said archly. "I was \_going\_ to say fur."

>Po rolled his eyes, a small smile belying his annoyance. Mantis took another look at his makeshift chart.<p>

"Seriously, though. Who am I to judge a warrior based on his size? I mean, look at me."

>Po tried to turn, the needles making it difficult for him to look over his shoulder.<p>

"I'm over here," mumbled Mantis from the opposite arm, sticking another needle in. He had to grab the panda's fur to avoid being thrown off when Po jerked.

Po waited until Mantis hopped down to grab more needles, then slowly wrote: \_I don't remember much about TL's attack, but I talked before then and couldn't after.\_

He paused, his back and arms starting to feel oddly numb, then wrote \_I'm not sorry I told Shifu that.\_

Viper shook her head. "I have to agree that he wasâ€|a little out of line," she said in a low voice.

>"I know he can seem kind of heartless," said Mantis, poking another needle into Po's neck. "Rumor has it he used to smile, though."<br>"But that was before Tai Lung, too," said Viper. On the side of the paper wall, Crane's silhouette briefly appeared.

"Yeah, uh, we're not really supposed to talk about him," he said, before retreating.

"If he's going to stay here â€" "

The three jerked their heads to the doorway, where Tigress stood.

"-He should know."

Po waved his hands at her, flashing a card between them.

\_I know about Tai Lung. He used to be a student here. \_

\_He was the first to Master the Thousand Scrolls of Kung Fu, before he destroyed the village and was imprisoned.\_

Tigress raised a brow, walking forward. Po dropped his arm and his gaze; Mantis retreated behind his back.

"He wasn't \_just\_ a student," she said quietly. "Shifu found him as a cub, and he raised him as his son."

>Po's eyes widened.<p>

"And when the boy showed talent in kung fu," Tigress continued. "Shifu trained him. He \_believed\_ in him. He told him he was \_destined\_ for greatness. But it was never enough for Tai Lung; he wanted the Dragon Scroll " Po looked down at his feet, brows furrowed over troubled eyes. He began to write on a card.

"- But Oogway saw darkness in his heart, and refused."  
><em>Is that why he destroyed the village? <em> Tigress nodded.

"He was outraged at Oogway's refusal. He laid waste to the Valley, and he tried to take the Scroll by force"and Shifu had to destroy what he had created."

>Her ears flattened. Po tensed at the sudden sadness in her eyes.<p>

"But how could he? Shifu loved Tai Lung like he had never loved anyone before"or since."

>Tigress looked up to see Po staring at her with unblinking eyes. She tempered her expression.<p>

"He has a chance now to put things right, to train the true Dragon Warrior."

>Po gave her a very knowing expression and held up a card.<p>

\_He's stuck with me.\_

Tigress didn't answer, but he could see in her eyes that she agreed.

\_I know I am not exactly ideal.\_

\_I am sorry.\_

\_I will try my best.\_

Tigress stared hard at the words on the cards, her fists clenching softly. She seemed to be debating with herself.

"I suppose that is the only thing we can ask of you," she said slowly. Po gave her a wry grin.

\_I thought you wanted me to leave,\_ he wrote. Tigress \_hmm\_'d, her eyes hard, but before she could reply Po felt a sting on the back of his neck and his whole body seized; he dropped the cards and fell to the floor, making Tigress back up in alarm. Mantis jumped on his face.

"Ack! My fault! Sorry, buddy, I accidentally tweaked your facial nerve" "

>Po felt his face twitch slightly, an uncomfortable ache in his chest.<p>

"Wow, I really hope I didn't stop your heart. You still with us?"

>Mantis began systematically pulling out his needles, and he paused when he crawled past Po's ear.<p>

"Sorry about that, but things were starting to get a little heavy," he whispered. If Po could have moved he would have smacked him. Several dozen needles later, he could shift his limbs, though they tingled unpleasantly and his hands shook.

"Well, at least you're not in pain anymore," said Mantis cheerfully. Po glared at him as Tigress left the room. He shook his hand a little bit, then drew out three battered cards.

\_Your food will be ready shortly\_

\_I'm cooking\_

\_The special tonight is Secret Ingredient Soup\_

He waited for his feet to stop tingling, then stood, shaking his shoulders. Mantis hopped up onto his arm.

"Wait, you didn't say you could cook. We're invited, right?" Po rolled his eyes, but nodded. He looked to the room's side wall, where Crane and Mantis were peering through the door, and gestured that they could come along.

In the hallway, outside her door, Master Tigress stood quietly. At a look from her Mantis jumped from Po's shoulder to Monkey's, and the other four of the Five slowly walked down the corridor, glancing back at the two. Po nervously scratched at an aching needle site as Tigress stared at him.

"Iâ€¦appreciate that you are taking this seriously," she said quietly. Po looked at her in surprise, and she held out a small stack of cards. He took them, and she nodded, leaving him to join the others as they walked toward the kitchen.

They were his apology cards, the ones he had dropped in the Arena. On top of the stack, facing up, was \_I am sorry/ a thousand pardons.\_

Po smiled to himself and stuck the cards back into their corresponding pocket, then followed the Five down the hall.

\* \* \*

><p>AN: I like angry Po. He has to take a lot of shit from the villagers, and he's not about to take it from Shifu, who really should know better.

Oh yeah, Grandpa Oogway for the win. I like the idea that Oogway knows how much of an ass Shifu can be and though he doesn't often interfere unless Shifu's about to royally mess something up, he'll go out of his way to make sure that Tigress has what she needs to teach \_herself\_ to power through whatever Shifu or the world throws at her.

This is evidenced by his actions in Secrets of the Scroll, where he allows Shifu to be an ass but gets him to give Tigress chances to prove herself, then helps her out when she's upset. Let me know if Oogway doesn't sound like Oogway, because I had a terrible time trying to figure out his dialogue.

Fire is definitely going to be a trigger for Po in here; not little fires, but the big, sudden ones? Yeah. His fear of Tai Lung on top of that is going to be a big part of his training, and he'll overcome it, but it won't solve the underlying traumas. Tai Lung's attack is just a small part of Po's fear, though it's the one we'll focus on here because he's not going to remember anything about Shen's attack until the second movie. It's like having a house with broken windows and an unsteady foundation. You see the windows and fix them, but you can't see the cracks in the foundation and although your house isn't drafty anymore, it still is not in good condition. TL's attack is the windows. Shen's is the foundation.

Again, Shifu is going to be more of a dick than he originally was. He likes perfection, and having a mute on top of a panda be the Dragon Warrior is going to feel like an insult to him. Po, in here, has significantly more difficulty in expressing himself, which sucks for someone who is so expressive. Having to force himself to be less exuberant and excitable, as well as being a little more introverted and less prone to dramatics, makes him a bit more approachable to the Five. He's still cheerful and amiable, but his silly side has had to be pushed back. He can't verbally defend himself or argue back like he did in the first film, which would trigger the Five's sense of duty in protecting someone who couldn't protect himself. I don't want them to pity Po or imply that he's weak, but he's a little more vulnerable here.

Although the Five took just about any shit Shifu threw at them in the first film without complaint and didn't stop him when he was an ass to Po, we saw that they weren't above disobedience when they felt it was necessary, such as Tigress arguing with Shifu over who was to stop Tai Lung and she and the others going off to fight him, against Shifu's orders.

I don't care what they're actually called; Mantis's claw thingies are claw thingies and shall be forevermore referred as such, or at least until I get tired of it and Google up what they're actually supposed to be named. I just like that he himself called them 'claw-thingies' in the third film.

End  
file.